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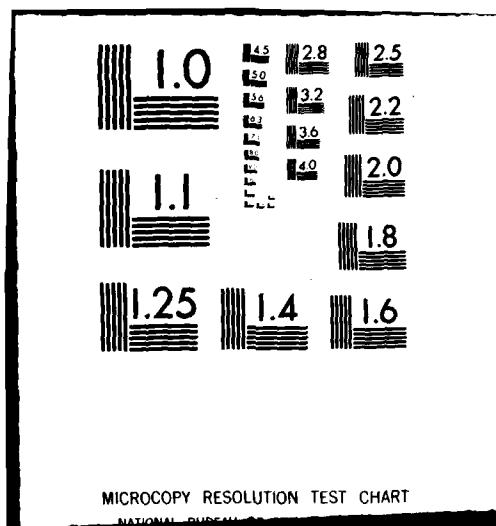
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by Dr. John A. Lent
Professor of Communications
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pa. 19122

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Transnational Influences on Commonwealth Caribbean Mass Communications

by Dr. John A. Lent
Professor of Communications
Temple University

Good news and bad news have characterized the indigenization attempts of Commonwealth Caribbean mass communications during the past decade. The good news is that local ownership is replacing that of foreign entrepreneurs in most mass media operations. The bad news is that all too often, one of the few local agencies capable of affording mass media is the government. The good news is that there are increasing efforts at local production and exchange of news and media content. The bad news is that some of these attempts have been sabotaged by petty jealousies of island nations, more attractive media packages at lower costs offered from the outside or technical problems.

This paper first looks at media ownership trends of Commonwealth Caribbean mass media, followed by recent changes in news flow and media content.

Media Ownership

Undoubtedly, foreign entrepreneurs have been willing to invest in the region's media, especially radio and television, but the need for this foreign ownership is ambivalently accepted by small islands, many of which are newly independent nations feeling compelled to collect television (and earlier, radio) as part of the paraphernalia of modernity. Incapable of raising needed investment and equipment capital, of producing enough of their own program content or providing the required training and skills, these governments have resorted to foreign ownerships or partnerships in consortia. The result has been that nationalists have decried this form of modern-day colonialism.

The three most persistent outside entrepreneurs involved in Commonwealth Caribbean media ownership have been Roy Thomson, Cecil King and Rediffusion, all British. Thomson had been active in radio, television and newspaper ownership in the islands and still maintains control over the Barbados Advocate-News and minority shares in the Trinidad Guardian and Evening News. These three newspapers, which until 1975 were completely Thomson owned, represent 39 per cent of the total daily circulation in the islands. He also owns part of Capital Broadcasting in Bermuda. But his interests have dwindled in recent years. At various times, Thomson had been involved financially with the Voice of St. Lucia, Antigua Star, Trinidad Mirror and Barbados Daily News, and with broadcasting units on Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados and Bermuda. His Thomson Television International (TTI) usually acted as a partner to a consortium of investors. For example, on Trinidad & Tobago, consortium partners of TTI were Rediffusion, Columbia Broadcasting System and the Trinidad & Tobago government. Thomson's name has come up occasionally in discussions of Bahamian media; at different times, he has tried to purchase the Nassau Tribune, ¹ Nassau Guardian and Radio Station 2WS of Nassau. And in 1960, he made an unsuccessful bid for the Jamaica Daily Gleaner, a decade after his rival, Cecil King, had surveyed Kingston as to the possibility of developing a third daily there.

Rivaling Thomson in the Commonwealth Caribbean for a number of years was Cecil King, also of Fleet Street. In the mid-1960s, when Thomson seemed in an invulnerable position in Trinidad, owning both daily newspapers, half of the radio stations, and shares in the only television system, King established another newspaper there, the Mirror and its Sunday edition. Within a few months, King's International Publishing Corporation, in conjunction with the Liverpool Post and Echo, Ltd., had also succeeded in acquiring the Barbados Advocate and its subsidiaries, Voice of St. Lucia and Antigua Star.

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However, by 1966, King, realizing his profit margin was being sliced,² sold all his Caribbean media to Thomson, who, as a result, owned all three dailies on Trinidad, the only daily on Barbados, and the chief newspapers of St. Lucia and Antigua. Thomson's subsequent sale of the Mirror plant and equipment to a Canadian firm led to the paper's death. He also sold the Voice of St. Lucia and Antigua Star by 1970.

The third big outside investor, Rediffusion, controlled broadcast rights in the region from the outset. By the early 1950s, the London-based organization controlled radio stations on the three most populated islands, Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago. Today, radio companies on Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, St. Lucia, Bermuda and Tortola (British Virgin Islands) are owned by Rediffusion. Rediffusion has also been a partner in consortia owning Trinidad & Tobago Television and Leeward Islands Television Services (Antigua).³

In recent years, the foreign ownership of Commonwealth Caribbean mass media has been diminished. By 1976, Guyana had all but nationalized its mass media forcing out Thomson in the process; two-thirds of the shares of the Thomson dailies in Trinidad & Tobago were sold, because of government pressure, to a local group (McHearney-Alstons), believed backed by the government. The Trinidad Sunday Guardian editor said the government brought about the sale, if only indirectly. "We were very critical of government and management felt we might get into trouble so they sold their interests," he said.⁴ The managing director of Trinidad Publishing Co. said Thomson knew of the regional feeling that mass media should be locally owned and therefore sold out. He said there was no government interference or pressure in the transaction, and that the government does not own any of the newspapers' stock.⁵ All editors at Trinidad Publishing Co. agreed there have been no editorial policy changes under the new ownership.

The only newspaper in the region still 100 per cent owned by Thomson is

the Barbados Advocate. However, there have been attempts to change that as well. In 1976, negotiations were proceeding with New York Times personnel, aided by the Barbados government, for the sale of the Advocate; they have since fallen through.

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Rediffusion has been relinquishing its properties in the area. The Rediffusion outlet on Jamaica, Radio Jamaica Rediffusion, was purchased in early 1977 by the government which planned to make it a "people's station." On Antigua, Rediffusion sold its shares of Leeward Islands Television Service to the Antiguan government in 1975.

Guyanese officials have expressed their feeling that they have a right to own sectors of the mass media and to be the final arbiter to form media policy. Minister of State Kit Nascimento said it this way: "If a developing country is to make full use of modern communications, it cannot leave matters such as ownership of media, and indeed media content, to chance because the media must become a vital, instructive, information link between the people and the governed." The Guyanese government is the sole shareholder, through Guyana National Newspapers, of the only evening and morning dailies, The Citizen and Guyana Chronicle, and one of two radio stations, Guyana Broadcasting Service.

There have been a few commendable alternatives to ownership and control by foreign entrepreneurs or local governments. Some of the smaller media--e.g., Dominica Star or St. Lucia Television--have gone a more modest route, keeping production costs within limits of available capital and resources. They have minimized foreign and local government influences in the process.

Another alternative to foreign ownership has been offered by the Trinidad Express. Since at least 1974, the Express has provided struggling newspapers of the smaller islands with technical and expertise help. The idea grew out of Publisher Ken Gordon's conviction that "the only way to get rid of foreign domination of the press is to get local people to develop expertise."⁶

lent/5

When the Nation of Barbados ran into difficulties in February 1974, just four months after its first issue, the Express lent support for which it was rewarded with equity in the paper. The same was done for the Voice of St. Lucia, Grenada Torchlight and Jamaica Daily News, and in each case, the Express was given fixed continuing management arrangements with Gordon serving on all four boards of directors. The Express has a 25 per cent share of equity in the Nation, Torchlight and Voice of St. Lucia and a smaller one in the Jamaica Daily News. Gordon said the arrangement is not meant to be a financial venture, but rather an effort to keep the indigenous press alive. The Express does not interfere in the editorial policies of the newspapers. ⁷

One aspect of mass communications that is still foreign owned for the most part are the advertising agencies of the Commonwealth Caribbean. In Jamaica, the largest advertising agencies in 1976 were Dunlop, Corbin, Compton, partly owned by Compton/New York; Kenyon & Eckhardt International, a worldwide firm; Lindo, Norman, Craig & Krummel, part of NCK/New York; McCann Erickson, wholly owned by Interpublic Group of Companies. Trinidad's largest agencies are Beston, Benton and Bowles, the majority stock owned by B & B/New York; Corbin-Compton, part of Compton/New York; K & E/CPV (Caribbean), part of Kenyon & Eckhardt's worldwide group; McCann Erickson, owned by Interpublic Group of Companies; Norman, Craig and Krummel, part of NCK/New York. Bermuda's main agency is Advertising Associates-Compton, a part of Compton/New York, and the chief agencies of Barbados are Corbin-Compton, again part of Compton/New York, and Smith and Oxley Advertising, ownership not known. Only since 1972, for example, have most (70 per cent) of the smaller wholly-owned Jamaican agencies come into existence. ⁸

One source pointed out the impact of multinational advertising agencies upon the Jamaican economy, stating:

The multi-national agency subsidiaries make a specialty of

servicing accounts of trans-national corporations operating in Jamaica. This is only one of the many ways that the advertising industry together with the mass media put a strain on the country's foreign reserves. In fact so fertile a field is the Jamaican economy for foreign-made and/or patented products that one agency, Lonsdale Hands, was established in the island for the specific purpose of servicing the Carreras Tobacco Company's account.⁹

News Flow and Media Content

Little doubt exists that both Commonwealth Caribbean news flow and media content are heavily dependent upon foreign services and sources, usually Euro-American.

News Flow:

Until January 1976, Commonwealth Caribbean mass media depended entirely upon foreign agencies for information from abroad and neighboring islands, the chief sources being Reuters (14 subscribers), Associated Press (nine subscribers), United Press International (four subscribers) and foreign broadcasting services such as BBC, CBS, Voice of America, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Visnews and the Central Office of Information in London. Unfortunately, only Reuters had attempted regionalization of news through its Caribbean Desk in Barbados. The Reuters operation included re-editing the London-to-South America Editing Service for Caribbean consumption and reception, editing and retransmitting messages from stringers in 13 island territories. AP and UPI both transmitted their news for the Caribbean by radio teletype from New York, neither service providing regional bureaus. The seriousness of this potential wire service imperialism was pointed out in a 1968 survey which found that 40 per cent of all news presentations on island radio stations originated from studios abroad.¹⁰ The difficulty with these foreign newscasts was explained by one program director, who said that even if a BBC news show is beamed directly to the Caribbean, it will contain numerous

lent/7

items of little or no significance to West Indians.

An encouraging sign was the development of the Caribbean News Agency (CANA) on January 7, 1976. CANA, serving 16 media systems, is structured so that 56 per cent of the shares are always owned by private media, 44 per cent by government affiliated press. The CANA chairman, Ken Gordon, told me this was done purposively to insure that the majority shares are owned by private media.¹¹ Before it was even launched, CANA was boycotted by a few newspapers which feared it would be a political tool of various governments.¹² The Bahamas Tribune refused to join for that reason, and the Gleaner Co. announced it would not participate in "a news service in which governments would be sharing in the operation and ownership thereof."¹³ The Gleaner Co. is expected to join soon. The Guyanese government demanded a seat on the CANA board as a stipulation to allowing its media to join, and at one time, campaigned at high Guyanese and Jamaican ministerial levels to have a Guyanese appointed as CANA chairman.¹⁴ Neither attempt succeeded.

After its first year, CANA showed a modest profit, experienced little, if any, political interference, doubled its daily wordage, and planned linkups with Prensa Latina of Cuba and other agencies. However, its originally-proposed specialized services have not been implemented.¹⁵

Some editors who are using CANA complain about its limited coverage (no indepth, analytical material), poor regional service, slow transmission, inadequate funding and in the smaller islands, inexperienced correspondents.¹⁶

Media Content--Television:

If not made in the United States or Great Britain, radio and television shows in the region have at least been patterned after prototypes in those nations; thus, sitting in a guest house in Barbados, I could view a television quiz show which not only copied an American format but even used questions about the United States rather than about Barbados. The reward for winning the

quiz: a trip to the United States. All television stations rely upon foreign sources for 60 to 80 per cent of their contents. For example, in a 1971 survey, I found that approximately 39 of Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation's 58½ weekly broadcast hours were foreign-originated, while 34 of Leeward Islands Television's 42 and 45 of Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation's 56 were in the same category.

An analysis of television shows on Trinidad & Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica and St. Kitts-Nevis in October 1975, showed similarly that imported programming accounted for 70 per cent of the total on Trinidad, 72 per cent on Jamaica, 87 per cent on Barbados and 90 per cent on St. Kitts-Nevis. During prime time, Trinidad uses 53 per cent imported programming, Jamaica 62 per cent, Barbados 84 per cent and St. Kitts-Nevis 90 per cent. If one excluded time spent on news and Government Information Service programs from prime time, the locally-made production percentages would be: Trinidad, 19 per cent; Jamaica, 18 per cent; Barbados, three ~~per~~¹⁷ cent, and St. Kitts-Nevis, none.¹⁷ The viewing public has obviously grown fond of these shows; a 1974 survey of 100 St. Lucians found that their favorite television programs were "Peyton Place," "Perry Mason," "Ironside," "Marcus Welby," and "Electric Company."

Very little local TV drama has been produced in the islands, mainly because of the cost and the lack of expertise. Producing regional dramas, such as soap operas, meets with the obstacle of cross-cultural interpretations. The lack of standardization of technical systems has also hindered the production and exchange of regional programming. Trinidad TV has 525 lines, Jamaica 625 lines modified USA Channeling, and Barbados 625 lines British. Live material can be exchanged in the region via satellite but at prohibitively expensive rates. For example, the costs to Barbados for one hour of live transmission via satellite from Trinidad is EC\$10,000.

Of course, reasons exist for the abundant use of foreign TV programs, the

most important being that they are cheaper than local shows. Foreign programs are used for other reasons as well, notably the insufficient advertising support for domestic programming and the strong ties culturally with Great Britain and the United States. The proximity of most Commonwealth Caribbean islands to the United States, thus facilitating travel between the two areas, and the large number of West Indians residing in the United States are other reasons broadcasting fare is patterned after that of the United States.

Again, there is some reason to hope that changes will occur. There have been a few successful co-production efforts; the most successful being the production of a color documentary on the Caribbean community in which Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago shared costs and crew.¹⁸ Also, at its 1975 meeting, the Caribbean Broadcasting Union agreed to a wide range of regional broadcast programs, including the creation of a "Humour in the Caribbean" show, 13 island profile documentaries and a six-part series on the work of the Caribbean Community Secretariat. The Caribbean Broadcasting Union also has resolved to standardize television equipment in the region to make more program exchange possible. Already, Jamaica has a standards converter and can transfer programs for either Barbados or Trinidad & Tobago.

Larger television systems are in the process of producing more local shows. Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation (Barbados), for example, plans to use a half hour local drama every Sunday and a local dance program weekly. Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation television, according to that station's general manager, uses 66 per cent foreign content now. The station has reached its saturation point in local production until additional staff, equipment and money are available.¹⁹ Most of JBC's local shows use interview, panel or quiz formats.

A common complaint among television personnel is that given their limited resources, they cannot hope to compete with foreign-produced shows. Yet the public, through conditioning, expects such a high standard. The general manager

of Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation (Barbados) seems to typify the thinking of numerous Third World broadcasters, believing, as he does, that television in a developing country should not attempt to be as "slick as in North America." He said television in a developing country should be educational rather than entertaining: "We should show the process of making a drama rather than the finished product. I hope to show rehearsals, rather than the play in its final form. There is a lot of artistic talent in Barbados and my responsibility is to make sure that work is shown. I am not too concerned about how well it is written but how enthusiastic the artist is."²⁰

Media Content--Radio:

Radio, like television, uses a large proportion of foreign programming. Radio Trinidad, for example, has until recently obtained over 70 per cent of its materials from overseas, while at smaller stations, such as Antigua Broadcasting Service and Radio Anguilla, the percentages have been 75 and 95 per cent, respectively. The Jamaica Broadcasting Authority, a government body which appraises broadcasting performance, in its yearly reports decried the use of American, British and Australian shows. In one such report, the Authority characterized the majority of Jamaican listeners/viewers as "non-whites watching white faces and white mores and white attitudes"; at another time, it chastized Jamaican announcers for mimicking the voices of American and Canadian colleagues.²¹ There have been improvements in both of these areas in recent years.

It is often difficult to determine what West Indian stations managers mean when they discuss local content. When personnel at Antigua's ZDK boast 99.9 per cent local programming, what they are saying is that because Antiguan disc jockeys spin the records and read the news, then the station is predominantly domestic. They fail to take into account the origins of the music and news. Another broadcasting director is more realistic, however, pointing out that on

67 per cent of his station's shows, "the disc jockey is the only thing that is local." Cuthbert discussed this phenomenon in Jamaica by saying:

With the exception of some religious programmes, serials, sports and news, most programmes are locally produced. But the disc jockey and other musical programmes feature a large proportion of foreign music. No doubt the fact that Jamaican youth prefer American soul and funky music to Trinidad's calypso is related to radio's priorities in music.

22

Recently, Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation radio designated that 75 per cent of all music aired must be Barbadian or Caribbean.

Since the late 1960s, efforts have been made to localize larger portions of Commonwealth Caribbean radio content, especially in Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, Bahamas and St. Lucia. Since its takeover by the government in 1969, TTBS on Trinidad & Tobago has increased its local fare to 40 per cent. Radio Barbados (CBC) has taken a similar step; in an $18\frac{1}{2}$ hour broadcast day in 1970, I found only three hours and 45 minutes devoted to foreign matter, most of which came from the BBC. The amount is even less today. On some Windward Island stations, patois is being used as a medium of broadcast, certainly an example of indigenous content. Additionally, radio stations such as Antigua Broadcasting Service, RZIZ on St. Kitts-Nevis and Radio Montserrat are involved in exchanging program material in simultaneous broadcasts in each territory.

What Has Changed?

Local media ownership and indigenous content are certainly a larger part of the Commonwealth Caribbean mass communications picture than they were a decade ago. However, one is left with the haunting question: Has much changed? Does much change if foreign entrepreneurs are replaced by government owners, some, such as Guyana, more repressive than the outside owner? Does much change

lent/12

if a media conglomerate such as Roy Thomson is replaced by a local group as media owners and then keeps the same editorial policy, as was the case in Trinidad & Tobago? Does much change if local elites are just as impressed with big mass media technology as the foreign elites were? Does much change if irrelevant, foreign-produced media content is replaced by dull, propagandistic government information shows?

Probably the most significant changes in the Commonwealth Caribbean mass communications picture have been those of the production exchanges between island broadcasting stations; the small, modest communication operations, and the cooperative venture of the Express in keeping alive small, indigenous media.

Footnotes

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- 2 L. Hunt, "Mass Media in West Indies," Democratic Journalist, 4/1967, p. 53.
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- 4 Personal interview, Johnson Ince, editor, Sunday Guardian, Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago, January 13, 1977.
- 5 Personal interview, M.A. Conyers, general manager, Trinidad Publishing Co.,
Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago, January 14, 1977.
- 6 Personal interview, Ken Gordon, publisher, Express, Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago, January 12, 1977.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Advertising Age, March 29, 1976.
- 9 Aggrey Brown, "The Mass Media of Communications and Socialist Change in the Caribbean," Caribbean Quarterly, December 1976, p. 48.
- 10 Guy Roppe and Neville E. Clarke, "The Commonwealth Caribbean: Regional Cooperation in News and Broadcast Exchanges," Paris: UNESCO, 1969, p. 12.
- 11 Gordon, interview, op. cit.
- 12 Correspondence, Etienne Dupuch to Ken Gordon, January 29, 1975.
- 13 Correspondence, Tom Sherman to Ken Gordon, December 12, 1974.
- 14 Speech, Ken Gordon before 4th Antillean Press Congress, Bonaire, October 1975.
- 15 See also: Marlene Cuthbert, "Some Observations on the Role of Mass Media in the Recent Socio-Political Development of Jamaica," Caribbean Quarterly, December 1976, p. 52.
- 16 Personal interviews, Ince, op. cit.; Compton Dalph, editor, Evening News, Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago, January 13, 1977; Leon Chongsing, editor,

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17 Everold Hosein, "Communication Issues in the Commonwealth Caribbean," paper presented at Caribbean Studies Association, Castries, St. Lucia, January 8, 1976.

18 Farouk A. Muhammad, "Communications Exchange," in International Broadcast Institute, "Communications and Information for Development Purposes in the Caribbean Area," London: IBI, 1975, p. 6.

19 Personal interview, Dwight Whylie, general manager, Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation, Kingston, Jamaica, January 14, 1976.

20 Personal interview, Austin Clarke, general manager, Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation, Bridgetown, Barbados, January 12, 1976.

21 Daily Gleaner, September 23, 1964, p. 18; November 6, 1962, p. 8; January 25, 1966, p. 5.

22 Cuthbert, op. cit., p. 53.